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ABSTRACT

Even Start is a family literacy and support program for families with young children. This paper focuses on the impact and potential of transitions for children and adults as Even Start helps them move across settings. Such transitions occur daily, such as from home to day care to work, or occur over time, such as a transition to formal schooling. The paper discusses ways of providing a stable base for children and families by building bridges between the settings in which they currently spend time to new settings, creating smooth transitions. The paper lists four guiding principles intended to build practitioners' understanding of the role of transition activities in Even Start as a basis for creating lifelong learners. The first principle is that parents, children, and families go through many transitions while in Even Start. Second, successful transitions require firm grounding in the present stage of development and appropriate challenge to move on to the next level. Third, change is preceded and followed by periods of disequilibrium, and stabilization marks the new stage of development. Fourth, teaching adults and children new skills to support lifelong learning is a major goal of Even Start programs. The paper then provides guidance on managing transitions into Even Start, within Even Start, into school, and into the community. Specific methods for planning for transitions, supporting transitions, and developing staff are addressed. (Contains 10 references.) (SD)

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Transitions

Closing the Gaps

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RMC RESEARCH CORPORATION

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Transitions

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BY MARY ELLIN LOGUE, SENIOR RESEARCH ASSOCIATE, RMC RESEARCH CORPORATION

The ages of 0-8 are filled with important life transitions for children and their families. Early childhood education programs, adult education programs, and special education services have begun to explore the meaning and impact of transitions. Even Start has made transition an integral part of its philosophy and service. In a sense, Even Start is a vehicle for transition, designed to move families on their way to successful experiences in work and school. This paper focuses on the impact and potential of transitions for children and adults as Even Start helps them move across settings.

TRANSITION DEFINED

To truly understand Even Start as a vehicle for transition, we must begin by defining "transition" itself. If we defined transition as activities to address the difficulties families encounter when moving from one setting to another, transition handbooks would go on forever. A more effective (and do-able) concept of transition is supporting individuals by firmly grounding them in their present stage of development and appropriately challenging them to move to the next. So, the challenge in Even Start is not planning better visits to kindergarten or holding resume writing workshops for parents. The bigger challenge is offering a stable base for children and families by connecting the settings in which they currently spend time and by building bridges to the other settings, creating smooth transitions.

In the ideal, planning for transition is not just another task to complete. It is a way to integrate and examine program activities and goals. Those who narrowly view transition as an end-of-stage activity miss valuable opportunities to build bridges from the beginning, rather than at the end, of a family's Even Start experience. By thinking of transition from the start, Even Start can help parents see themselves as life-long learners who will spend a limited time in Even Start before moving on to other learning adventures.

The following four guiding principles can be the starting point for building practitioner's understanding of the role of transition activities in Even Start as a strategy for supporting life-long learners.

TWO TYPES OF TRANSITION

Assumption 1: Parents, children and families go through many transitions while in Even Start. The family members with whom Even Start staff work will move among many settings in the course of their daily lives and they will move across these settings both horizontally and vertically (Kagan, 1992):

- *Horizontal transitions* refer to the various settings children and adults experience at any given point in time. For example, during the course of a day, a mother may bring her child to a sitter in the morning, take the bus to her own job, travel 20 miles to the clinic for health care, then bring her child to another sitter so she can

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attend a parenting class. Changes from one setting to another may be smooth and coordinated or disjointed. The number and quality of these daily transitions can affect a parent's motivation to participate in Even Start.

- ***Vertical transitions*** refer to connections among settings over time. For example, a child might receive childcare from a relative during his first year of life, attend a toddler playgroup at the community center during his second year, be at home with his mother and siblings during his third year, attend a Head Start in his fourth year, and attend two different kindergartens at different schools because of a family move. How similar or different these settings are in terms of the activities, expected roles and types of interaction, and how well participants communicate with each other will affect how well the child adjusts to the next setting.

Even Start staff members can advocate for family members, enabling them to participate fully in each setting. Take, for example, a parent who has one child in infant daycare, one in Head Start, and a third in a first grade Title I program. Each of these settings may define parent involvement very differently. The mother may encounter resistance from program staff if she tries to participate the same way in each program, when the "rules" or expectations may be different. She might turn away from a program that indeed encourages a different kind of parent involvement. As advocates, Even Start staff could ease the confusion by talking to service providers in all of the programs to help the parent find a comfortable role for herself in each setting.

With its focus on families rather than on individual children, Even Start can ease major vertical transitions by maintaining contact and involvement with families when a family member makes a major transition, such as from preschool to elementary school. Communication skills, observation skills, and awareness of how other systems operate strengthen the Even Start advocate's ability to serve. He or she can be a listener, interpreter, and communicator, helping the family understand the "language" of each setting's expectations, opportunities, and structures, while building stronger inter-agency understandings and willingness to cooperate.

GROUNDED AND CHALLENGED

Assumption 2: Individuals make successful transitions when they are firmly grounded in their present stage of development and appropriately challenged to move to the next stage. A quality environment supports the learner's development, and the quality environment depends on practitioners being able to do three things suggested by Kagan: ***hold on, let go,*** and ***remain in place*** during families' periods of transition and stabilization.

Holding on.

Holding on means providing a caring, nurturing environment in which participants make the best of their Even Start experience. In the course of development, people experience stability, followed by disequilibrium and change, followed by stabilization in a new stage of development. These changes, found everywhere in the natural world, are easier to manage with responsive mentors in supportive environments. In recent years, we've learned the importance of secure social environments in a child's development. When babies enjoy warm, sensitive, consistent responses, they will probably evolve into autonomous toddlers and cooperative and sociable preschoolers (if the supportive physical and social

environments continue). These environments are critical throughout life, not just in the early years. The nature and quality of supportive environments will vary from person to person, especially for older children and adults, and must change as people change. A key characteristic of a supportive environment, at any age, is that it supports one's present development—the way a person is *right now*.

Consider the different ways parenting education supports parents based on the parents' stage of development. Parents of infants, immediately concerned with the physical needs of their children, can hardly imagine being in power struggles with their children when they become toddlers. Parenting curricula too often focus on issues of raising older children and downplay the realities of parenting infants. In supporting parents of infants, Even Start must address the common concerns of new parents as well as the individual concerns of families. There is no "one size fits all" supportive environment that will work at all stages of life, but a succession of supportive environments throughout life (Kegan, 1982).

Given the range of ages (from infant to adults) and developmental levels Even Start staff work with, it's vital that staff have solid understandings of human development. This background will come in handy when planning activities and deciding on types and frequency of interaction, goals, and services that will be appropriate for people at diverse levels of development. These understandings will also contribute to supportive environments that allow participants to use the skills they have, learn and consolidate new ones, and transfer those skills to new situations and settings.

Not everyone follows the "typical" developmental progression, so person-by-person assessment will contribute to the creation of a supportive environment for individuals wherever they may be on the developmental continuum. Even Start advocates need to know how to ask questions, watch, and listen to understand the realities of adult learners' lives. Eleanor Duckworth (1972) suggests that people (in this case, Even Start participants) will raise the right questions when the setting feels right. Otherwise, their true concerns or questions may be obscured or subtly expressed. For example, a too-highly structured parenting education curriculum focused on raising preschoolers might prevent parents from discussing what's really on their minds, such as their relationships with older children or the threat of gangs or drugs to their adolescent children (Weinstein-Shr, Issue 7, Look at Even Start).

Although it might seem like an endless task, many practitioners find the creation of supportive environments to be the easiest and most gratifying part of their jobs. Many choose to stay in their fields for the long term because of the satisfaction it brings.

Letting go.

Letting go means knowing when participants are ready for the next step within and beyond Even Start and making sure they take that step when they're ready. This is a difficult skill to master. Often with young children, it is easy to know when a new role is required. For instance, once a baby starts to crawl, the adult's role in terms of supervision changes dramatically. It becomes harder to let go when someone has the skills for a new level of functioning, but not the confidence to try them. For example, a parent may be prepared for the GED but afraid to sign up to take the test. Or a parent, after losing a job (even if for reasons not concerning her competence) may hesitate to apply for another. It is counter to growth to allow one not to use the skills he or she has developed.

In his book ***The Evolving Self***, Robert Kegan gives the example of a young man leaving home for the first time. He complains bitterly to his parents about how difficult it is for him, hoping that they will invite him to come back home. Rather than

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doing so, they sympathize with him and tell him they know he'll get through the difficulty, but they don't encourage him to give up and come back. He feels rejected by them and angry that his years of being a "good" son don't seem to matter. The parents gently but firmly let go. When the mother finally tells the son that he can come back if he really can't handle his new life, the young man is disappointed. He feels they have lowered their expectations of him. The son does not come home but seeks out help in his new environment. He begins to grow into the new self he was ready to become. His parents' letting go was the kind of support he needed to move on to his next level of development.

Holding still.

Imagine the same story if the parents had made a major life change, such as a sudden move or a divorce, at the time their son was making the difficult transition. The boy's struggle would have been much harder, because the value of trusted adults "holding still" during periods of transition cannot be over-estimated. During transition times, the developing person is likely to be emotionally sensitive and highly anxious. People in the helping professions, such as Even Start, need to know how to hold still in the face of another's anxiety during change.

Staff members can enhance their effectiveness by examining their own styles of holding on, letting go, and standing still for family clients experiencing either vertical or horizontal transitions. The quality of successful transitions depends more upon creating these supportive environments than it does on implementing activities to familiarize others to new settings.

DISEQUILIBRIUM FOLLOWED BY STABILIZATION

*Assumption 3: **Changes are preceded and followed by periods of disequilibrium: a stage of stabilization marks a new stage of development.*** Change, whether it is positive or negative, biological or social, involves stress. An optimal degree of stress propels development. Too much stress overwhelms the individual or system and hinders development. Even Start staff can play a valuable role in monitoring the disequilibrium around transition and supporting individuals in their new stage of development, once they begin to feel stable in that new stage.

At periods of transition, like a child's growth spurt, there is often regression and disequilibrium. T. Berry Brazelton, the noted pediatrician, calls these periods "touchpoints," predictable times and events in development when children's behavior seems to fall apart. Parents find that the old ways of interacting with their child don't work, causing frustration and uncertainty. Brazelton and his colleagues see these times as fertile periods for change and growth for the family.

The touchpoints model, based on Brazelton's work (Statler, O'Brien and Hornstein, 1995), addresses this problem by building supportive alliances among parents and professionals when these touchpoints occur in children. Parents come to know their children better and to appreciate the complexity of development because someone is helping them work through the disorganization and recognize the moment as an exciting time of development for the child. This model, and modifications to it, have great promise and implications for Even Start practitioners. Well-planned and well-timed interventions by Even Start staff can turn a child's normal growth

spurt into a learning opportunity for the family rather than occasion for family crisis. Because many touchpoints like teething, motor advances, shifting sleep patterns, and stranger anxiety are predictable, staff can anticipate the disequilibrium and plan support for parents.

Adults experience touchpoints too. For example, some of the common adult touchpoints: pregnancy, a new baby, a divorce or separation, a critical illness or death of a loved one, a job change, progress from one learning level to another. Even Start staff can plan for these predictable life events by examining and perfecting their strategies for helping the person through the event into the next level of development. Recognizing that such change often involves regression, staff can view many of participants' set-backs as harbingers of growth rather than cause for alarm. For example, a mother with a new baby might chose to leave a center-based program temporarily; the program might make arrangements for home services to enable her to continue in the program without interruption. Certain features of support will be specific to individuals but others can be generalized across families. Taking time to plan ahead for how staff can support families in continuing their involvement in the program through, given predictable crises can mediate problems or stresses for staff and program resources.

TRANSITION: AN INTEGRAL ELEMENT OF LEARNING

Assumption 4: Teaching adults and children new skills to support a pattern of lifelong learning is a major goal of Even Start programs. But even when knowledge and skills are developed, the disposition to use them may require more support for certain participants. Lillian Katz (1995) suggests that educators examine, in addition to knowledge and skills, the development of dispositions and feelings to help learners apply what they know to a range of their life experiences, especially in their transitions.

The development of dispositions refers to enduring habits of mind or action such as curiosity, interest, and mastery. When learners develop maladaptive patterns (such as guessing a word by looking only at the first letter or waiting for someone else to fill in the answer), teachers should read these as signals that there may be potential damage to the learner's dispositions to be active and self-directed. Many adult learners enter Even Start with damaged dispositions, expecting their teachers to confirm their view of themselves as inadequate learners. Even Start, as a supportive environment, can allow participants to reinvent their images of themselves.

Transitions provide rich opportunities to integrate learning into life. People learn best when they build on prior knowledge or experience, have the guidance of a more experienced teacher, have the opportunity to consolidate that skill through independent practice, and apply the skill in a new context. Because emerging capacities develop first during collaboration with more skillful partners and then are internalized to become part of the learner's own repertoire (Vygotsky, 1978), quality programs should focus on what learners can do with support. Too often, programs focus on what a person can't do at all, rather than on what they can do with help. When programs address learning and skill development as moving from partnership to independent

application, they integrate transition into daily practice in a way that supports learning.

To make these theoretical concepts work in practice, staff need to be skillful in observation, have working understandings of child and adult development, and have the ability to work in partnership with children and families.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Whether they are aware of it or not, staff members deal with transitions all the time. Some of the major challenges programs face (such as recruitment, retention, acquisition of parenting and job-related skills, children's social and academic adjustment to school) reflect the degree to which programs are actively focusing on transition. Efforts to support families' transitions must occur throughout the program, not only at times of major change.

Transitioning into Even Start.

Despite the promised reward of Even Start, parents may feel overwhelmed by the apparent demands. Transition efforts at this stage include working with parents to overcome the barriers to participation. For many parents, childcare for young children is an enormous barrier. Helping parents with child care involves more than securing babysitters; the quality of the care and parents' concerns about sharing the caregiver role with someone else also come into play. Until parents feel secure with their child's childcare arrangements and his or her care providers, commitment to the Even Start program is likely to be tentative. Careful attention to both child and parents' adjustment to childcare is important at this phase of transition.

Another element of support, transportation, cannot be provided in isolation. The transportation plan for families must take into account the entire context of the families' needs. Families will have different needs depending on the childrens' ages, primary care givers and on the parents work or learning schedules as well. As with so many aspects of the program, one size does not fit all.

Some parents may have the interest and motivation to actively participate in the program but have family or personal problems that interfere with full participation. Securing counseling or other support that help families deal with immediate crises is sometimes the first step in preparing a family to transition into Even Start, thus families to take full advantage of services once they enter Even Start.

Transitions within Even Start.

Once families are participating in the Even Start program, staff need to focus both on the horizontal and vertical transitions family members experience. By definition, Even Start staff members have two dimensions to their jobs: the actual job functions and a coordinating function across core Even Start program elements. New learning is best supported when it is reinforced across settings, so family members feel continuity, and transitional support, when staff members forge linkages in what and how they teach. Safety, for example, is a topic of high parental interest. Many early childhood programs address the topic with children and perhaps with articles to parents in the newsletter. Less often, resources are shared from adult education to early childhood or from parenting to adult education. A wealth of ideas and resources exists among the program dimensions of Even Start that could be shared in new ways, reinforcing the linkages for learning for families.

A thorough examination of the coordination mechanisms across services will also support transitions. If families, not services, are at the center of concern, the various service providers should sup-

port each others' efforts as well as the well-being of families. If it becomes a burden for parents to coordinate the schedules of service providers, something is wrong. Coordination will not happen by itself: time devoted to planning the transitions families make in the course of a week in accessing the services they need is time well spent. Knowing what other service providers are doing is not enough.

Transitions into School.

Even Start can support families as children move from early childhood programs to elementary school directly and indirectly. Planning for the transition can become a topic within parenting classes and home visits. In this way, the specific concerns for each family can be addressed individually. Early childhood programs prepare children directly through visits, role playing, and modeling new routines. Indirectly, personnel from both settings can share information about children and helpful routines/activities. Programs can also proactively help parents deal with their children's, or their own, anxieties. Program staff can take proactive roles with school staff (and staff from other early childhood programs) to help bridge cultural and language differences, and to help staff understand parents' involvement and/or help staff recognize strengths of families who are economically or educationally disadvantaged. Programs can also help participants retain what is essential to their role from one setting, applied to another. For example, when children move across settings, a parent's role as the child's primary teacher may remain the same while the specific opportunities for parent involvement will change in the new school. Discussion among parents and staff can help underscore these subtleties.

Transition into the Community.

In preparing adults for further education or for employment, Even Start provides skill training, but that's only part of the picture. Class time spent in job readiness skills and discussions of educational and training opportunities help participants mentally try on a range of possibilities. As participants better define their goals, staff may arrange for mentoring programs where future workers shadow others doing similar work. Role playing interviews and practicing the commute to a new job are ways in which staff can empower parents to feel more confident as they move out into the community.

Programs can and should maintain connections with employers and postsecondary institutions to facilitate next steps for adults. Because first jobs often do not work out, class time spent on how to try again is a proactive step in assuring a long-term successful transition. Discussion about how to access community services and solve problems in the workplace and community go beyond making a successful transition on the first day of work to ensuring success in the new setting.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGERS

The main goal for transition is a long-term one and yet the steps taken to meet the goal are daily and concrete. It is not easy to take a concept as all encompassing as transition and integrate into all program functions. The way transition will be operationalized in each program will vary but all managers need to consider the implications of the concept in their program planning, staff development and collaborations.

Planning for Transitions.

Transitions will occur with or without assistance from Even Start but the quality of those transitions will be greatly affected by the support

families get from staff during these times. Frequent discussions about transition can be part of all planning activity. Job descriptions can include functions specifically related to transition, both at the family level and the program level.

Transition is not simply providing orientation activities though such activities have a place in planning for transition. Specific activities designed to introduce participants to new settings can ease the immediate stress of transition. Activities designed to ease children's transitions might include visits to new settings, parent orientation meetings, opportunities for sending and receiving teachers to meet and exchanging records, and home visits by new staff. For adults, transition activities might include workshops on training and educational opportunities, role playing interview situations, or practicing the commute to a new job. While these activities may help with immediate adjustment, they do little to ensure long-term success in the new setting. Both short and long-term planning needs to occur to ensure success in Even Start and beyond.

Collaboration to Support Transitions.

Discussion may be the single most important tool to creating successful transitions. Traditionally, discussion about transition has meant that last year's teacher and next year's teacher share information. Much more can be done. There are circumstances in which creating continuity between settings facilitates transition. In early childhood, similar activities, expectations styles of teaching/learning help children retain the benefits of one setting as they adjust to another. For adults, having a clear idea of the expectations and routines of a new setting and the confidence to ask for help when needed may be enough to ease transition. In both cases, Even Start staff need in-depth knowledge of how other programs work and what it will take for their participants to be successful in the new settings.

A shared commitment to high-quality programs is the best insurance against transition difficulties. If participants move from one supportive environment to another, the disturbances will be minimal. Opportunities for partners to clarify quality in their programs and work together to create it will benefit all families. It may be frustrating for Even Start managers to work with programs of lower quality than theirs. They do not have control over the other programs but they do have control over the quality in their own programs and over communication with these partners. It would be a mistake to value continuity between programs, if one is of questionable quality, over a commitment to providing high quality service. Many early childhood teachers, for example, struggle with the dilemma of whether to make their own programs less developmentally appropriate if children are to move into traditional teacher-centered programs. Maintaining open dialogue with partners about beliefs and practices will provide all staff opportunity to reflect on their own thinking, reflection that may precede change.

Staff Development Issues

Because Even Start staff often come from different backgrounds, it is important that everyone in the program understands the other components well and how they function. Such knowledge helps create a more collaborative atmosphere within the program as well as preventing fragmentation of services to families.

Training topics will vary from program to program given the needs of families and staff. One area that crosses all programs is frequent discussion about cultural influences. Whenever possible, it is desirable to include in all training opportunities, discussion on ways to integrate home culture into program activities.

Training need not be done in isolation. Programs can extend the value of their training

dollars by including collaborators in Even-Start trainings and participate, to the degree possible or desirable, in training opportunities offered by collaborating partners. Not only does this provide more staff development opportunities for the dollars available, it strengthens collaboration and provides for opportunities for staff from various programs to move in similar directions with respect to service delivery.

Training needs to be on-going to allow staff time to develop, practice and integrate new skills and attitudes into daily practice. Training need not always be in the form of more workshops. Supervision is a valuable tool for following up concepts introduced in formal settings.

In providing training or supervision, it is important to start where people are. Staff interests, skills and concerns should drive training opportunities. This principle is fundamental to work with families and needs to be central to staff development as well. Remember that staff have "touchpoints" too. Anticipate times when staff will need to make changes in the way they work. Expect regression or disequilibrium and build in additional support during these times.

Finally, in addressing staff development issues, flexibility is critical. The principles raised in this paper are ideals. There is no one right way to "do" transition. There is often a gap between what should be done and what is possible or reasonable to do. Keep the ideal in sight as you work with what you have.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

How do you measure whether a program is "doing" transition well? You will know that you are addressing the issue when the settings children and families inhabit are high quality, supportive environments that support learning and growth. If the overarching goal with respect to transition is for family members to move from setting to setting toward increased competence, high quality services must exist across the community. It must be part of everyone's job to work toward such a goal.

Everywhere in the country, services to children and families are undergoing massive changes in structure and funding. Significant disagreement exists about how to help educationally and economically disadvantaged families. Programs are competing with each other for declining resources. The climate for collaboration is not a positive one but the need for collaboration couldn't be stronger, or more obvious.

Even Start, as a believer in collaboration, plays a central role in assisting family members as they move across all of the settings the community has to offer from one setting to another. The means of reaching this goal will vary from program to program, community to community, but Even Start can play the important role of generating discussion of the family as the center of collaborative effort. By being a partner with families in reaching their goals for better lives and a partner with fellow community members in creating nurturing environments for families, Even Start staff help create the kind of meaningful continuity that diminishes the need for specific, one-time transition activities.

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Resources

Transitions to Kindergarten in American Schools: Final Report of the National Transition Study. by John Love, Mary Ellin Logue, James Trudeau and Katherine Thayer. Final report to the Office of Policy and Planning, U.S. Department of Education, RMC Research Corporation, Portsmouth, NH. (1992)

This national survey details the activities and focus of transition activities for public schools. It includes survey results and those of case studies in eight communities. It remains the most current information we have on the topic at the national level.

Touchpoints: The essential reference. T. Berry Brazelton, M.D. Reading Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley (1992).

Brazelton's practical and helpful book has usefulness to staff and parents. The book is divided into three parts. The first part addresses the major "touchpoints" or periods of development from birth to age 3 when parents may benefit from looking at their child's behavior in a different way. The second part of the book addresses challenges to development, addressing topics such as fears, divorce feeding problems, hyperactivity, etc. In part three, "Allies in development", the roles of fathers and mothers, grandparents, friends, caregivers and doctors are discussed.

The Six Stages of Parenthood. Ellen Galinsky. Reading Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley (1987).

In this book, Ellen Galinsky details six distinct stages through which parents pass as their children develop: Image making stage, nurturing stage, authority stage, interpreting stage, interdependent stage, and departure. This focus on the development of parenthood has implications for parenting education as well as adult education. Based on case studies, the book is easy to read and allows the reader/parent to identify with the stories of parents in the book.

The Evolving Self: Problems and Process in Human Development. by Robert Kegan. Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press (1982).

Kegan examines how we develop from infancy to adulthood and the ways in which our social environments support us in our growth. Central to his theory is the way we make meaning from our experiences and how that changes over time. This is a theoretical book but one with potential for use in staff development and higher-level planning.